

Augustus' bath towel

Robin Osborne

All politicians need an image. Politicians who change the whole régime have to be particularly careful about their image. Here Robin Osborne looks again at the images that the first Roman emperor created for himself, and tries to work out what on earth he is doing with that bath towel...

It is never easy being the first. And being the first emperor was no exception. After all, the Romans didn't want an emperor. Julius Caesar had been assassinated for trying. So Augustus had a problem. Whatever he did, he couldn't be seen to be taking power into his own hands. But the old republican structure of government wasn't working – it had just led to civil war. Twice. And his answer? Not change but stability. Make such minor adjustments to the structure of government that everything seems unchanged. But at the same time, manoeuvre yourself into a position where everyone expects to say what you do and do what you say. Never mind the power, just feel the authority.

Manipulating an image

Augustus used several means to get himself into this position of authority. But one of the most important was the construction of an appropriate image. He needed an image that was instantly recognised. But he could not afford to have an image that seemed to be self-promoting, nor one that made him look too senatorial or Caesarean or too much of an upstart. But how could he do this when the Roman portrait tradition stressed individuality, and when the only current alternative was to look like one of the kings of the Hellenistic east?

Earlier in his career, when he was competing with Antony, he had exploited some of the stylistic tricks of Hellenistic rulers. Now that he was the victor, his images took their inspiration from the art of classical Greece. Classical Greece had a number of advantages. The Greek world after Alexander the Great was a world of kings, and everything Rome was determined that it was not. But the Greek world before Alexander was a world of cities ruling themselves – like Rome. And whereas Hellenistic art stressed the individual, and what individuals achieved, classical Greek art did not individualize; it celebrated individuals whose actions benefited the community.

Fitting in

Augustus' 'classicizing' is famously to be seen in the sculpture of the *Ara Pacis*, the *Altar of Peace* that was like no altar previously erected at Rome. Its extensive friezes showed Augustus engaged in religious rituals. Like peace, piety was not something anyone complained about. In the light of Rome's recent troubles, buttering up the gods had to seem a good idea. And religious actions were bound to call to mind the pious days of the past and suggest a conservative stance. Yet the figures in the friezes on the *Altar of Peace* look like no sculptures previously seen in Rome. The collection of handsome figures, many of them barely differing one from another, and the elegant clothing that just minimally hints at the

bodies underneath recall nothing so much as the frieze of the Parthenon from classical Athens. As the Parthenon frieze gathers Athenians of all sorts into a religious procession so the frieze of the Altar of Peace puts on show pious Romans, the Senate, and Augustus and his family as, and among, priests. The 'Altar of Peace' put the right sort of awe into Augustus.

Standing out

But if Augustus needed to stress his role in civil government, he nevertheless still needed to be seen as a leader of men. There was much to do on Rome's frontiers if the Roman Empire was to become coherent and defensible. Augustus himself and his deputies were enormously active militarily, particularly in the 20s B.C., in programmes of consolidation that brought great swathes of further territory under Roman control. It was vital that the soldiers who achieved this thought of Augustus as their *Imperator*, their 'Commander in Chief', and that they saw him as the great general to whom they wished to give their oath of loyalty. One cannot find a great general on the Altar of Peace; some other icon was required.

The image of Augustus that meets this demand has become his most famous image. This is the statue found in 1863 at a villa belonging to Livia, Augustus' wife, at Prima Porta, sited above the Tiber, fifteen kilometres outside Rome. In this statue a larger-than-life Augustus (seven feet tall, as against reality's five foot seven) is seen wearing an elaborately decorated military breastplate and pointing with his right hand into the distance to which he directs a calm but steady gaze. In his left hand he cradles a spear, but his feet are bare and by his right leg Cupid perches on a dolphin.

Once more in this statue Augustus exploits classical Greek art. We see it in the smooth face, individualized enough for us to recognise Augustus but far from distinctive, mature but somehow ageless. We see it too (right) in the pose, which is adapted from Polyclitus' famous 'Spear-carrier' (*Doryphoros*) whose legs and left arm it shares, and which perhaps justifies the unmilitary bare feet. But nothing in classical Greek art parallels this breastplate or the function that Cupid performs. Cupid is here to draw attention to Augustus' lineage: through his adoption into the family of the Julii by Julius Caesar he could boast a line that went back to the goddess Venus.

If Cupid gives Augustus a place in divine history, the breastplate gives him a place in the history of the universe. The central scene is an historical one. The king of the Parthians hands back the eagle standard, captured from the Roman legion defeated at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C., to a Roman soldier who has the she-wolf at his feet. This commemorates the recovery of the eagle in 20 B.C., an achievement reversing Rome's moment of shame. The celebration is watched and legitimated by the chariot of the sun, the figure of the moon, and the personification of dawn, Aurora. Below the scene

we have the personification of the Earth, with a cornucopia. These figures, and other figures of deities and personifications of defeated provinces, set the particular victory against the Parthians, and the Rome of Augustus and the Lupercal, into not just a global but a cosmic context.

The striking pose, and the pleasures of decoding the imagery on the breastplate, guarantee this image's impact both in antiquity and today. In the modern world the Prima Porta statue was a favourite with Mussolini, who gave a copy to the city of Zaragoza (the ancient city of Caesaraugusta) in Spain in 1940. In antiquity it was emulated by later members of the imperial house: both Nero Caesar, brother of the emperor Caligula, and the emperor Nero were portrayed in variants of the pose, and so too was the emperor Trajan (p. 3, top left).

Covering up

Look more closely at these ancient emulators of the Prima Porta Augustus and you can see that they are not in fact identical. It is not just that the position of the arm varies, or that some of them do not have bare feet. They don't have the swathes of cloth around their waist. What on earth is Augustus doing with all that cloth?

Art historians have a word for Augustus' 'bath towel': they call it a 'hip-mantle'. This rather crazy name is very misleading. For the 'hip-mantle' is not in fact a special garment, but a garment worn in a peculiar way. In the classical period ordinary Greek men are frequently shown wearing their cloak (the Greek *himation*) in such a way as to leave one shoulder and one side of their torso bare. In the Hellenistic period sculptors take to showing powerful men and gods with their cloak slipping still further. Just the end of it is now shown above the shoulder, and the rest appears wrapped around them, hipster-style. Although displaying the male torso did not have the same sexual charge as displaying bare female breasts, it did lend charisma, and there is certainly some kinship between the Venus de Milo and this way of showing men.

The hip-mantle probably became familiar to Romans through its use in portrait statues. The statue known as the 'Tivoli general', dating from around 100 B.C. and found in the sanctuary of Heracles Victor at Tivoli (top right), is a good example. This is a particularly interesting parallel to the Prima Porta statue because it derives its name from the presence of a breastplate, but a breastplate that on this occasion is not being worn but sits on the ground beside the figure.

What is extraordinary about the Prima Porta Augustus is that he is wearing the hip-mantle over his military dress. He has no need of any sort of cloak around his waist, for all there is to cover up is the bottom of the breastplate and the layers of leather below it. Clearly Augustus' successors did not see the point, for they dropped the hip-mantle, substituting a military cloak thrown over left arm and shoulder, usefully serving to connect arm and body and make the statue less fragile. So why did Augustus need a bath towel?

One sort of answer to this is in terms of sculptural composition. The sweep of folds across the lower body emphasizes the dynamic given to the statue by the position of the left leg, acts as a counterweight to the extended right arm, and lends a thrust to the body in that direction. What is more, the length of cloak hanging down from the left arm both draws attention to and balances the Cupid beside the right leg. But the addition of a nonsensical piece of clothing seems a high price for achieving these effects, for which alternative means are not hard to devise.

An alternative answer lies in the significance of the cloak. If it was important that Augustus appeared as a soldier and leader of the army it was also important that he did not cease to be one Roman citizen among many. The cloak here may not be the toga that swathes Augustus as he sacrifices on the Altar of Peace, but it gestures in that direction. This needed to be a statue that could be put up in the cities of the Empire, as well as in the army camps. Augustus could not afford anyone to think that his position rested

on military might alone.

But there is another way also of thinking about this. Perhaps Augustus does need his hip-mantle. Can we be as sure as all that that it is superfluous? How confident are we that we know what he looks like underneath? Look at that breastplate. We see not only the figures of Roman and Parthian, of the Earth and the Sun, we see also the outlines of the rib cage, the muscles, and the nipples of a male body. Is this a breastplate shielding a buff Polyclitan body from our gaze? Or is it Augustus' body? Augustus is no spear-carrier; nor is he a 'Tivoli general'; he is the son of a father who has been assumed among the gods. Where does a divine body begin? Cupid reminds us that this statue does not show a man standing in the space of this world, it shows a man who mixes with the gods. There never was a female body under the Athena Parthenos' golden gift-wrap, so why should we expect that Augustus had any body other than this? Augustus needs his bath towel to stimulate the imagination and to give him a super-body.

Robin Osborne teaches at the University of Cambridge and found himself wondering about Augustus' bath towel when discussing a student's essay. Most of his publications are on Greek history and Greek art. His Athens and Athenian Democracy was published earlier in 2010 by Cambridge University Press.